

COMPLICATED DESIRES: YTO BARRADA

Born in France, 1971. Lives and works in Paris and Tangier.

On a clear day, you can see the coast of Spain across the Strait of Gibraltar from the beach in Tangier, Morocco. Africa and Europe almost touch, and the political and emotional tension is palpable, especially for the Moroccans who are forbidden from entering Europe without a visa after the European Union's 1985 Schengen Agreement and subsequent Schengen Convention in 1995, which abolished border posts within Europe while tightening its external border control. Even so, those who live in Tangier increasingly long to traverse the Mediterranean Sea, so much so that their will often becomes entirely directed toward this illegal, disruptive, and often fatal goal. In Arabic, when one speaks of an acquaintance who has crossed from North Africa to Europe, one does not say "they immigrated" but rather "they burned," meaning they burned their passport and left their past behind.¹ This was not the case for Yto Barrada, however, who returned to Tangier from her studies abroad and began an ongoing photographic portrait of the Moroccan city in *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project* (1998–present). The title comes from a 1964 recording of storyteller Driss Ben Hamed Charhadi made by American author Paul Bowles, who was living in Tangier at the time documenting and translating Moroccan oral traditions. In his tale, Charhadi comments on the Moghrebi adage: "Even a life full of holes, a life of nothing but waiting, is better than no life at all."² Like the storyteller's quote, Barrada's photographs evoke the troublesome situation of immigrants and would-be immigrants who abandon one land for another and one set of struggles for another, leaving themselves "empty," in a permanent state of longing.

Born in Paris to Moroccan parents, Barrada has firsthand experience with the liminal existence of immigrants. The photographer/filmmaker's dual citizenship has allowed her to move between Tangier and Paris for most of her life. After spending her youth in Morocco, she left to study political science at the Sorbonne. While researching ways that Palestinians and Israelis negotiate roadblocks in the West Bank, she found herself taking more photographs than notes and determined that her images more fully captured the spirit of the people and their

political struggles. Eventually she shifted fields and went to the International Center of Photography in New York to pursue a career as a photographer. Shot in reportage style, Barrada's works are nonetheless more loosely suggestive than strict photojournalism. In *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project*, which includes pictures of people floating through the present and yearning for the future, figures are often shown from above, from behind, sleeping in public places, or staring off in the distance, disconnected from their surroundings and in stasis. Their ennui ultimately defies Orientalist stereotypes and depicts Moroccans as full subjects with complicated motivations and desires.

Barrada's long-term examination of Tangier is remarkably open-ended and diverse with a wide variety of subjects that include cityscapes, landscapes, industrial sites, and Aaron Siskind-like abstractions of paint flaking off of shipping containers. Taken as a whole, the series works allegorically and metonymically to present a multifaceted view of Tangier over time, a photomontage that conveys the state of the city as well as African/European migration in general. As the Moroccan and Spanish governments move ever closer to an undersea rail-tunnel connection between the two nations, the artist's meditation on the unfulfilled promise of prosperity through emigration from Africa and the one-way flow of tourists from Europe is undeniably germane. Of her images, Barrada has said, "They expose a secret code that is a way of confronting disillusionment that, in spite of the obstacles, makes possible—like poetry or playing—the passage from one space to another, from waste ground to playground."³

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1. Yto Barrada, "A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project" (artist's statement), in Yto Barrada, *A Life Full of Holes/The Strait Project* (London: Autograph ABP, 2005), 1.

2. See Driss Ben Hamed Charhadi (Larbi Layachi), *A Life Full of Holes*, a novel tape-recorded in Moghrebi and translated into English by Paul Bowles (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1982), 6.

3. Yto Barrada, interviews with Nadia Tazi, in *Yto Barrada/A Life Full of Holes/The Strait Project*, 60.